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ABSTRACT

In January 1981 the Community Advisory Council of the North Allegheny School District in Pennsylvania undertook a program called Planning for Educational Awareness through Community Examination (PEACE). This program involved a poll of the community to determine the major issues facing schools in the eighties and public opinion about how these issues ought to be addressed. By June 1981, five task forces were at work, focusing on the agenda, data identification, issues clarification, data gathering, and public relations. By September, school administrators had been informed, a preliminary list of issues had been generated, and public forums were scheduled for October. A total of 120 persons--considered a low turnout--attended the forums. The top issues identified included correlation of student needs with educational programs, rising costs of education, school discipline, equitable allocation of funds, and educational excellence. The final report included the ranking of the issues as well as a section presenting student input. A number of changes are planned as a result of the project, including an elementary child screening program, expansion of the gifted education program, a guidance curriculum, and parent inservice sessions. Another indicator of success of the project is that the Community Advisory Council plans to use the same technique to develop criteria for closing schools. (Author/JM)

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P. E. A. C. E. P R O J E C T

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Shirley C. Arnold

NORTH ALLEGHENY SCHOOL DISTRICT

September 8, 1982

CEFP International Conference, Columbus, September 27, 1982

In January, 1981, we believed we had a tiger by the tail. The district Superintendent, the School Board, twenty-five community members from the North Allegheny School District (not all of them parents) and I stepped off on a major project to test the climate of the community regarding our schools.

Gallup had done it for years. The Gallup Poll seemed to come up rather predictably with the same answers year in and year out. Summarized, they indicated a lack of confidence in the public schools. We anticipated finding more of the same.

So to avoid turning our efforts into a massive defensive strategy, we determined to enlist public energy in identifying the issues which our community felt our schools would face during the decade of the 80's.

We sought guidance from CEFP based at Ohio University. We were fortunate to have a new Superintendent who had worked with the organization and was familiar not only with their personnel but with their expertise.

The C.A.C. acted as steering committee for the project. C.A.C. is an acronym for Community Advisory Committee. It is comprised of twenty-five members who serve two-year terms, and it has been a functioning group in our district for ten years. It meets once a month with a representative of the School Board and with me--I serve as administrative liaison. Each year in January, the Board assigns a specific task to the group. The task

is a year-long assignment and the results provide valuable resources for district use. For instance, the C.A.C. has researched and made recommendations regarding competency based education, human growth and development and library media services, just to mention three of their major chores. This assignment to work with the community was the most challenging.

In order to make our core group as cohesive as possible, we spent our first two meetings working together to develop a mission statement. That's no small task given the make-up of our C.A.C.. It includes corporate executives, women who choose to work at home, political figures, retired persons, teachers, and aspiring board members. Each had his or her own good ideas about what we were all about. Our mission statement contained thirty-three words. It stated quite simply:

that our mission was to involve the community in identifying the educational issues facing the North Allegheny School District in the 1980's and in making recommendations to address these issues by determining the most pressing needs and evaluating their solutions.

The second major task was to develop a timeline for our project. The final report was due to the School Board in December, 1981. Working back from that final date, we designed a timeline that included time to plan, to collect data, to hold public hearings and workshops, to identify preferred alternatives and action plans, and to provide time for revisions and final confirmation by the public before presenting the plan to the Board.

We anticipated three significant effects as a result of the process. Quite aside from the written plan which would be presented to the Board, we believed

that we would also:

1. Gain and share an understanding of participatory planning in North Allegheny for future use.
2. Garner and use citizen involvement and inter-agency cooperation in the development of recommendations for a plan for the future.
3. Assist decision makers in North Allegheny in setting direction and expending public funds in the best interest of the public.

Two months later, by March, 1981, the group had selected a chairperson and co-chairperson, had designed a mission statement, had spent time clarifying the meaning of consensus management and was geared up to take on the awesome task of community involvement in identifying issues which faced our schools in the 1980's.

By June, 1981, immediately prior to the summer break, five task forces were at work.

The Agenda Task Force plotted the agenda and logistics for our public forums.

The Data Task Force identified sources of data and strategy for obtaining it.

The Issues and Definitions Task Force undertook the clarification of issues which the steering committee had generated at a work session in April.

The Data Gathering Task Force whose task was to determine:

- . the kind of data to be gathered
- . the kind of data available; for instance, census figures, an excellent resource, were not yet available
- . data which must be generated and sources of data

and finally, the PR Task Force whose major assignment was to get our program to the public and to infect them with our enthusiasm.

To insure the understanding and support of administrative and professional staff, we recognized the need to keep administrators current with the planning of the steering committee. Administrators in turn, could meet with their

individual staffs at regular meetings to share essential information. In August, 1981, an afternoon session of an administrative executive academy was scheduled for a review of the progress which had been made and for active participation in brainstorming the issues which administrators believed would face our schools in the 80's.

At this point, in August, 1981, the steering committee had generated an initial list of twelve issues which they considered significant. The administrative group added nothing new to the list, but did pinpoint the issues which appeared most critical to them.

It was nearly time to take our work to the community at large. A summer update memo issued by the project chairperson listed the following progress:

1. The Agenda Task Force had prepared the draft agenda for the public forums and meeting sites had been reserved.
2. The Issues Task Force had developed a format for presenting information and had reduced it to a single page format.
3. The PR Task Force had released its initial notice about public forums to the press.
4. The Data Gathering Task Force, taking its lead from the list of issues suggested by the steering committee and the administrative staff had begun its collection of data to be used at the public meetings and the workshops.

September, 1981 marked the beginning of a concentrated effort to insure our project's success. Weekly meetings were held throughout September as we finalized plans for two public forums scheduled for October 13, 1981. We felt we would get better participation if we scheduled both an afternoon and an evening session. The leeway thus created should encourage extensive participation by each parent, by shift workers, by those with day schedules, by teachers and administrators within the district.

The agenda for the public forums was finalized; limited to three hours, the agenda provided time for a presentation of the initial list of issues, small group meetings to expand the list and to determine priorities, sign-up for the workshop sessions and adjournment.

The handout which would be distributed to each participant was determined. It would contain:

- . a cover
- . agenda for the evening
- . issue sheets which followed the single page format
- . a rating sheet
- . a workshop sign-up sheet

On September 30, two weeks before the public forums, the steering committee conducted a "dry run" of the forum sessions. We found that we needed more time to practice the ranking of issues procedure and scheduled an additional meeting on October 6, one week before the forums, to practice our math.

October 13, 1981: The culmination of months of work and planning yielded mixed results. Participation in the public forums was low. A total of one hundred twenty persons attended both forums. Forty-four of the one hundred twenty persons signed up for continued work in the workshops. The original list of issues generated in April was expanded by two additional issues. The priority ranking of issues by the participants resulted in a listing of the top 7 issues in the following order:

1. Correlation of student needs with educational programs.
2. Rising costs of education.
3. School Discipline.
4. Equitable allocation of school funds for programs at each level.
5. Excellence in education.
6. Decline in enrollment.
7. Home/school communication.

Both number 5 and number 7, excellence in education and home/school communications, were eventually integrated into the first one, correlation of student needs with educational programs which left a listing of five priority issues.

The workshops on the five top issues continued throughout October and the first two weeks in November. They produced restatements of the priority issues as goal statements, recommendations for action, timelines and costs of the action and persons/groups responsible for follow through.

On October 21 the steering committee that had begun the project ten months earlier critiqued the results of our efforts. Our major concern was the low attendance at the forums and the subsequent workshops. We identified three factors which we believed impacted on the attendance:

1. The publicity was not intense enough.
2. Persons felt that an individual vote had no power.
3. A traditional attitude which believed that the School Board did not "heed" the community.

Three tasks remained:

1. Compilation of a final report to the Board.
2. Evaluation of the total process.
3. Presentation of the report to the Board.

The final 48-page report included a background statement, major findings and recommendations, the ranking of original issues, an extensive appendix and a separate section titled Student Input. Students from each level, elementary through senior high, spent class time discussing the issues and sharing their recommendations. The recommendations reflected a wide range of creative thinking.

From elementary youngsters

. On Declining Enrollment:

"I think NA should take kids from other districts that too many kids so then they would be less crowded and we would have more kids."

. Response to the question on the kinds of classes needed to improve the program:

Study halls.

. On Rising Costs:

Have kids supply their own paper, crayons, etc..

From middle school

. On Discipline:

We think at the beginning of the year teachers and bus drivers should tell the students their rules. Detention and suspension should also be explained.

. On Correlation of Program and Needs:

- We should be allowed to chew gum.
- Find out the problem and correct it!

From secondary

. On Correlation of Program and Needs:

More emphasis placed on learning subject matter not just hearing about it.

. On Discipline:

Students must know what is expected of them.

All of us who began the project grew throughout the process. We did many things the right way and some things the wrong way. Perhaps the best assessment of whether or not the project succeeded lies with changes that have

occurred as a result--and there have been changes.

1. The district will determine this year the best method for implementing a child screening program at the elementary level.
2. Gifted education will be expanded.
3. Computer education will be implemented.
4. A guidance curriculum will be implemented.
5. Parent in-service sessions will be designed and piloted.
6. Intensive search for grant money will be conducted.
7. Committees are exploring redistricting and criteria for school closings.

The second indicator of success occurred within the past month. As our district moves into a year of development of a five-year long range plan, the C.A.C. was given a task to develop criteria for rezoning attendance areas and for closing schools. Their initial response has been to gear up for the P.E.A.C.E. procedure in order to reach an extended community. To me that decision spells success.